

The Making of Nationalism: Identity, Exclusion, and Continuity from Antiquity to Modernity

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Abstract. This paper explores the basis of nationalism through three cases. Despite its ancient origins, nationalism has persisted throughout history as a strong and continual force. Beginning with the Greek conceptualization of the "Hellenes" versus "barbarians" during the Greco-Persian wars, the ideological foundation of civilization versus barbarism has been used as a tool for unity and moral justification. This was one of the earliest examples of a community mobilized through nationalism. The study then examines how the Enlightenment and 19th-century nationalist movements, notably Hungarian nationalism within the Habsburg Empire, reappropriated classical themes and narratives to assert political legitimacy and resist imperial centralization, which portrays this pragmatic form of nationalism under a similar light. Finally, the Bosnian parallel is presented. While corroborating with the established view of national identity built on created concepts and a manufactured sense of community, the limitations of purely modernist interpretations of nationalism are also questioned. In essence, the paper asserts that nationalism is rooted deeply in both historical narratives and evolving sociopolitical contexts, not one separate from the other. This multifaceted perspective builds a nuanced and balanced understanding of nationalism's persistent relevance throughout history and its enduring place in modern nations.

Keywords: Nationalism, Hellenic Identity, Barbarian Dichotomy, Pan-Hellenism, Ausgleich (Austro-Hungarian Compromise)

1. Introduction

When Aeschylus staged *Persae* in 472 BCE, Athenians celebrated the defeat of the “barbarian” Persians—not merely as a military victory, but as a testament of their own unwavering civic virtue [1] the term “*βάρβαρος*” was initially translated as “one which does not speak the Greek language”, but following the Greco-Persian wars, it began to imply hubris, despotism, and savagery. Centuries later, claims of civilization versus barbarism echoed through exploitation and revolution. Imperialist attempts at containing ethnically diverse communities through oppression sparked revolution. How may Greek literature from classical antiquity have affected later ideologies in the Enlightenment period? Was the Greek vs. Barbarian polarity a consequence of the Greco-Persian wars, or was it a

deliberate ideological construction to define the Hellenic identity? Lastly, what parallels can we draw between unification against Persia and Balkan self-determination against the Habsburgs?

1.1. Unification against Persia

Athens, after supporting the Ionian Revolt in 498 BCE, knew retaliation from Persia was imminent. Except, not all city-states were fond of conflict, and remained neutral while some actively allied themselves with Persia---the most notable being Thebes. Out of 700 Greek city-states, a mere 30 were initially willing to take up arms and sent delegates to Sparta for a conference of war [2]. In Greek society, citizens were often inclined to identify with their individual polis rather than the collective Hellenic character. Each polis was a sovereign state with its own form of government, laws, and customs, and it was often that city-states harbored political and economic hostility towards each other; thus, the Pan-Hellenic league is attributed by historians as an advancement in Greek unity and is responsible for the Hellenes prevailing against Persia at the battle of Salamis [3]. Renowned Greek historian, Herodotus, describes the Pan-Hellenic league as the Hellenic alliance for those who wish greatness for Greek civilization, disregarding inter-poleis feuds for the interest of their ethnicity [4].

The immense disparity between the minuscule city-states and the vast Persian empire is what made Greek victories so ideologically potent. Each triumphant battle of the Greeks had seemed like the Gods had granted their divine favor. For instance, Aeschylus proclaims the failure of Xerxes' campaign as punishment by the gods for his hubris, "but when rashness drives/Impetuous on, the scourge of Heaven upraised/Lashes the Fury forward. [1]" According to the writings of Aeschylus' Persae, the Persians were not simply political adversaries but moral opposites---embodiments of tyranny, excess, and submission to autocracy. It is a common theme in Athenian literature that Xerxes, Darius I, and other prominent figures incurred the wrath of God's through their exuberant lifestyle and prideful manner. Herodotus likewise utilizes numerous dichotomies to illustrate the dynamic between Greek and Barbarian and further the ideological polarization of the barbarian. Histories contrasts the "libertarian-minded" Greeks and the "enslaved" Persian subjects, as Herodotus recounts Demaratus of Sparta explaining to Xerxes, "free they are, yet not wholly free; for law is their master, whom they fear much more even than your people fear you. [4]" The Persians, from the Greek perspective, were inferior by measure of virtue. Athens understood itself as the antithesis of the barbarian, allowing the Greeks to forge a new collective identity of Pan-Hellenism founded on ethnocentrism. By cementing themselves as liberators who were resisting Persian savagery, they instilled a divine justification into Hellenic superiority---engendering a character all citizens could adopt.

1.2. Effects on enlightenment ideas

Over two millennia later, the revolutions of 1848 echoed the same dichotomy of liberty vs. despotism, citizen vs. subject, and civilization vs. barbarian. The ideal of Greek freedom against Persian tyranny was a powerful piece of symbolic capital that nationalist movements in the 19th century could draw upon. This historical narrative, which was deeply embedded in European education and culture, represented a collective, prestigious past. The British philosopher, John Stuart Mill, declares, "The true ancestors of the European nations (it has been well said) are not those from whose blood they are sprung, but those from whom they derive the richest portion of their inheritance. The Battle of Marathon, even as an event in English history, is more important than the Battle of Hastings." [5] By invoking this history, revolutionaries in 1848 were not just asking for

political change; they were claiming a moral and historical legitimacy that tied their modern struggles for self-determination to a revered antiquity. Thus, Nationalism has become inseparable from this framework of identity politics and moral superiority observed during Classical Antiquity, while also evolving through the modern ideals of ethnic sovereignty and statehood. This progression may be observed through Colonialism in the 18th and 19th centuries.

French Algeria is a prime example of not only ethnic superiority but also moral justification. Colonization in France throughout the period of 1848 was not limited to the political right. Rather, socialist journals, such as *La Démocratie Pacifique*, frequently reported on the “mission to civilize Africa” [6]. Jules Ferry, republican philosopher, emphasizes in a Parliamentary debate, “I repeat, that the superior races have a right because they have a duty. They have the duty to civilize the inferior races [7]”

Ethnocentrism was a direct evolution of racial polarization---engendered by the necessity for labor and cheap materials. This same polarization can be seen throughout classical antiquity, where colonial France saw wealth and the bolstering of Nationalism, the Hellenes saw a unified identity. Similarly, the Habsburg monarchy faced the same ethnic challenges to its authority. The same enlightenment ideals that evolved from cultural exclusion in Ancient Greece was adopted by ethnic groups under the rule of the Habsburgs. The Habsburg monarchy, much like the Persian Empire before it, struggled with the tensions of ruling over a culturally and linguistically diverse population. Where the Greeks had defined themselves by polarizing the “Hellenes” and the “barbarians,” the Habsburgs faced the inverse. Instead of unifying against an external enemy, they attempted to control multiple ethnic groups within one imperial framework.

This mistake was evident in the Revolutions of 1848, when Hungarians, Czechs, Croats, and Italians challenged Habsburg authority. The Hungarian nationalist Lajos Kossuth, for example, understood the moral capital of liberty as a universal right: “All nations are endowed with an equal right to independence, whatever may be the territory they occupy or the number by which they are reckoned” [8]. This rhetoric resembles the ideological structure of classical Greece, where liberty was upheld in the face of a barbaric culture founded on servitude and oppression. Kossuth's words affirmed that the Habsburgs represented the same despotism that Enlightenment ideals condemned.

Refusal to grant autonomy to ethnic minority groups exacerbated division in the monarchy. As Pieter Judson notes, “Habsburg officials consistently imagined their own position as one of cultural superiority, a civilizing mission toward supposedly backward nationalities” [9]. Such language implicates the Athenian strategy to categorize political interests or enemies as incapable in virtue, as Aeschylus had characterized the Persians as slaves of hubris and excess. Just as Athens could not conceive of Persia as equal but only as the barbaric other, so too did the Habsburg Empire view Hungarians, Czechs, and Slavs as subordinate peoples to be assimilated or controlled. But while this exclusion had once forged a strong Hellenic identity, in the Habsburg case it fractured imperial unity, as the “barbarians” within demanded recognition as nations in their own right.

1.3. Summary

From the stage of Aeschylus's *Persae* to the revolutionary speeches of Lajos Kossuth, the dichotomy of liberty versus despotism, civilization versus barbarism, has remained a persistent political motif. In classical antiquity, the Greeks defined themselves against the barbarians to unify against Persia; during the Enlightenment, European thinkers inherited this language to articulate liberty as the essence of civilization; in colonialism, it became a justification for domination; and in the 19th century, subject peoples of the Habsburg Empire employed it to demand self-determination. Thus,

the period from Athens to Vienna demonstrates how the exclusionary framework that once produced unity later engendered fragmentation.

2. Rise of nationalism in Hungary

2.1. Hungarian nationalism in the Habsburg Monarchy

In the 19th century, the Habsburg Monarchy faced an existential challenge: the various forces of political, cultural, and administrative centralization over the course of centuries were increasingly challenged by an ascendant Hungarian nationalism. The seeming patchwork of resistance against imperial overreach began to coalesce and take the shape of a more concerted effort that utilized the empire's institutional, linguistic, and bureaucratic mechanisms to recast the nature of their relationship with Hungary. This process came to a head with the *Ausgleich* (or Compromise) in 1867, a radical re-scripting of the Monarchy's structure and the transformation of the Monarchy into a dual state. In the estimation of Leslie C. Tihany, in *The Austro-Hungarian Compromise, 1867 - 1918*, the *Ausgleich* was revealed not as a concession, but rather a "legalized reconciliation" that was built upon decades of Hungarian resistance," such is the power of nationalism over imperial power.

2.2. Political resistance: institutional leverage and the defiance of imperial authority

In fairly short order, Hungarian nationalists began to understand that the Habsburgs' political and governance centralization was insufficient to undermine their autonomy, particularly given that political authority, once enshrined, would be deeply embedded in political apparatuses. Rather than reject this political framework, nationalists crafted ways to use that political framework to contest imperial authority. Things like the diet and county administrations became instruments of autonomy and resistance to imperial authority. The Hungarian diet, which was a medieval assembly with a lengthy tradition and a long history of institutional governance in Hungary, became a site of resistance. By the mid-19th century, R.J.W. Evans has argued, the diet became a "focal point of discontent" [10] and at times, a medium for negotiating and rationalizing Hungary's relationship with the monarchy, and Hungarian politicians like Ferenc Deák and Lajos Kossuth contended over competing notions of sovereignty. Kossuth, the dynamic leader of the 1848 revolution, used the diet to contest Habsburg demands for taxation and conscription, condemning imperial authority as a "decayed structure" that disregarded Hungarian rights. After the defeat of the revolution, the diet operated as a zone of passive resistance. In 1861, delegates of the diet boycotted Habsburg reforms and made the centralized Reichsrat unworkable. As Evans notes, the county administrations--which Evans labelled as "fifty-two republics" [10] because of their degree of autonomy--continued this passive resistance and ramped it up, for example, through inter-county communications and unofficial pre-diet meetings, and through their elective office-holders, at times preventing the royal mandates from being realized.

By 1866, after Austria's defeat at Königgrätz in the Austro-Prussian War, the monarchy was feeling the weight of political compromise and Emperor Francis Joseph had no alternative but to negotiate. As Robert Gildea argues, "Above all, the Magyar nobility... had to be bought off for the long-term stability of the Monarchy" [11]. Deák, the "architect of the *Ausgleich*," presented the diet's demands framed as a legal return to the previous historical status quo that Hungary's 'rights' had been defined by the "liberal, monarchic constitution of 1848," rejected by the dynasty during the violence of 1848/9. Deák himself stressed that it was not a radical demand but a restoration of

existing legal dust: he wrote in his memoirs: “The Ausgleich does not ask for new privileges; it seeks only the recognition of what is already ours— the constitutional order of 1848, which was violently suppressed but never invalidated in the eyes of Hungarian law” [12]. The diet's vote in 1867 to ratify the Ausgleich (209 to 89) made it the legitimate voice of Hungarian autonomy and reasserted its authority and legitimacy, and formally brought to a close any Habsburg claim to unqualified exercise of political dominion over questions of Hungarian agency. Cultural Assertion: Hungarian Language as a Cultural Nationality

2.3. Cultural assertion: magyarization as a tool of national identity

At the cultural level, Hungarian nationalists countered the Habsburgs' efforts of Germanization by pushing the idea of the Hungarian language as the standard for national identity, beginning with the elements of backlash against Joseph II's Germanization from the late 1780s. Evans references people such as Ferenc Kazinczy and, in conjunction with sociological slurs against Germanizing individuals such as András Fáy, considers these individuals to be leading figures in a shift of the public sphere that appropriated Hungarian to replace Latin and German. Evans purported that a common language was a necessary precursor for a coherent nation. By 1845, Hungarian was "the language of constitutional record and dietal proceedings" [10], and the use of Hungarian was federally mandated in both educational and governmental offices. Tihany notes that this "strengthened a Hungarian solidarity" but goes on to characterize this as "unworkable" cultural uniformity produced by or at the expense of imperial convenience or definition.

Institutions in the Habsburg Empire, like the 1868 Nationality Law, which mentioned some rights for minorities, were not only common but also entrenched the pre-existing hierarchically dominant position of the Hungarian variety, with obligatory use in the government and education. Tihany described it as a "hypocritical and lying constitution" [13], which was at least a performative act, and it legitimized a Hungarian cultural hegemony while tokenizing diversity in an area of constitutional canon. The Habsburgs gained a certain advantage as this would ensure the blocking of a Habsburg vision of a German empire, and for Hungarians, it was even arguably helpful in creating the conditions for an institutional culture against imperial conditioning.

2.4. Administrative tensions: local loyalties over imperial obligation

In the case of bureaucracy of rank, to the bureaucracy of knowledge production, the Habsburgs faced a unique situation, developing a royal administration in Hungary, primarily populated by Hungarians, where the nobility were involved in local interests or a new ethic of local interests, as opposed to (in the past) an attachment to the empire. Evans notes that it resulted in an "overwhelmingly Hungarian" [10] administration, primarily middle nobility officials who opposed centralization. In addition, these bureaucrats also bucked the Habsburgs' reforms by stalling implementation: when Vienna undertook its reorganization of tax collection in the 1850s, the local Hungarian officials stalled it by redirecting revenues to local projects, including Hungarian education and for construction of highways in the counties.

However, by the 1860's an obstinate stalemate was a result of their resistance. The monarchy created an abomination that melded these local interests as local nobles, and the monarchy created a redundant circus of governance in Hungary, where "local loyalties frequently trumped imperial obligations" [10]. Added to the Ausgleich, the codification of this scenario, Hungary maintained control of the local states and created joint secretariats with Austria for foreign affairs, for war, and for finances, which produced some semblance of unity. As Gildea explains, "the military strength of

the Monarchy was mortgaged to the economic interests of the nobles in the Hungarian parliament." [11] However, for Austria, it was not a choice; it was a necessity, one that Count Friedrich Ferdinand von Beust, Austria's chief negotiator for the Ausgleich, acknowledged clearly. In his memoirs, Beust was able to provide a retroactive point of view from that post-Königgrätz moment: "After Königgrätz, the truth was unavoidable: Austria can only stand as a great power if it stands with Hungary, not against it. Our strength is insufficient to subjugate a people that has so fiercely defended its autonomy." [14]. Beust's first-person account, as the official lead negotiator of Austria's Ausgleich discussions, collapses any claims of a "benevolent compromise"; it confirmed that military defeat and Hungarian resistance left the monarchy no option.

Even "joint concerns" like the budget were negotiated every decade, which should have been a warning sign that Hungary was in control of Imperial finances. As Tihany notes, "the military power of the empire was tied to the economic interests of the Hungarian parliament" and "also further diminished any authority" from the center.

2.5. Summary

The Ausgleich of 1867 was not some kind of benevolent imperial compromise but rather a pragmatic recognition of Hungarian resistance. For many decades, Hungarian nationalists had weaponized the political institutions, cultural identity, and administrative networks to weaken Habsburg centralization and produce a dual monarchy in which Hungary emerged as an equal partner—and not a subject state. Kossuth astutely observed, this new system, or "Dualism," was in reality "the alliance of the conservative, reactionary and any apparently liberal elements in Hungary with those of the Austrian Germans who despise liberty, for the oppression of the other nationalities and races." [11] Kossuth may have been highly critical of dualism, calling it a device to oppress the minorities, but those critiques identified a more pronounced point: Hungarian nationalism had changed the empire irreversibly. As Tihany notes, the Ausgleich "utilized and placed on a constitutional basis the common interests of Austria and Hungary," [13]; but only on resistance—a mobilization that turned empire aspirations into a tenuous partnership. By 1867, the Habsburg Monarchy was no longer a centralized empire but a manufactured ghost of the constituent forces it sought to subjugate.

3. Rise of nationalism in Bosnia

3.1. Formation of Balkan nationalism

A region notorious for a history of ethnic conflicts, political instability, and economic underdevelopment, the Balkans present a peculiar environment seen nowhere else on the continent. At one point named the powder keg of Europe, the Balkan region was, as the metaphor suggests, a tension-filled barrel of gunpowder, waiting to be ignited.

Today, the battle scars of history are evident across Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a nation that has experienced nationalism to its fullest. On the superficial level, numerous parallels can be traced between the rise of 20th-century Bosnian nationalism and Hungarian nationalism under Habsburg rule. In both Bosnia and Hungary, the Habsburg authorities attempted to manage diverse populations by promoting certain forms of ethnic consciousness, a motive-driven method to isolate certain ethnic groups in preparation for future revolts.

This example, alongside many other nationalist movements across Europe and the world, supports Irish political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson's claim that the nation, and

therefore nationalism, exists because people imagine their shared connection and comradeship through shared language, media, and culture [15]. Moreover, parallels can be drawn to the Greeks, where the collective identity of “Hellenes” versus “barbarians” was forged despite “Hellas”, or Greece, itself being divided into numerous city-states with varying loyalties. Like the works of Aeschylus’ *Persae*, which helped craft and spread narratives to polarize and strengthen Greek identity over Persia, Bosnian nationalists emphasized a Bosnian identity distinct from neighboring Serbs and Croats. Specifically, through ethnic narratives such as shared language and descent, religious narratives rooted in Islam as an indication of cultural autonomy, and historical narratives recalling Ottoman-era sovereignty in resistance to Habsburg occupation, Bosnia established a clear stance against its foreign rulers. These narratives served as foundational origins for Bosnian nationalism, as they forged a distinct Bosnian identity that was consciously constructed and mobilized in response to political domination, cultural pressures, and imperial rule.

3.2. Ethnic narratives

During the Habsburg dominion, Bosnian nationalists were active in promulgating narratives on shared descent, in which language played a crucial role in. Though linguistically related to Serbian and Croatian dialects, local vernaculars in *lingua franca* were highlighted by the movement as emblems of a unique Bosnian Muslim cultural heritage [16]. These narratives were derived from already-present realities of the everyday lived experience, traditions, and collective memory of the Bosnian community. Moreover, the centrality of Islam in Bosnian identity reflected centuries of Ottoman rule, a connected past, where religious practice was an integral part of community life, social organization, and personal identity, not just political agenda [17]. Publications like *Bošnjak*, a key Bosnian Muslim cultural magazine, insisted on a literary language that saw Slavic linguistic roots of central and eastern Europe merge with Islamic and Ottoman cultural influences, signaling a separate ethnic identity [18]. By doing so, Bosnian nationalists created a symbolic boundary that set them apart from their Serbian and Croatian counterparts. However, the journal also cleared its lines in distinguishing Bosnia from the Islamic world, promoting local language in a Latin alphabet rather than Arabic script, and discussing future directions for the community distinct from Ottoman nostalgia [18].

3.3. Religious narratives

A key driver for the nationalist movement, religion played a crucial role in Bosnian narratives. A key point to remember when comparing Bosnia to the rest of Europe is its historical ties with the Ottoman Empire. Specifically, the influence of religion. Before the Habsburgs’ prominence in the Balkans, the region was a significant territory of the Ottoman Empire, which spanned over six centuries from its founding in 1299 to its dissolution in 1922. During this period, the internal Christian religious structure in Bosnia was relatively weak and fragmented. Instead of having a dominant church, Bosnia had competing Christian denominations [19]. This lack of a dominant Christian church left the population religiously unengaged and more receptive to Islam. The religious ties that were shared between the Balkan Bosnians and the Ottoman Empire established a strong Muslim identity that sharply contrasted with both the Catholic Habsburg rulers and their Orthodox and Catholic neighbors. In an attempt to bring all religious communities under state control as well as to foster loyalty to the empire, religious institutions were restructured with the clergy only answerable to the Austro-Hungarian authorities. A “national church” was created under Austrian supervision, attempting to replace the Islamic religious structure with one aligned to the

monarchy [20]. Unsurprisingly, these measures faced significant opposition. In public debates and national discourse, Bosnian Muslim leaders invoked their historic ties to the wider Islamic world and the Ottoman caliphate to argue for the preservation of their religious and cultural autonomy under the new regime. Muslim political organizations, newspapers like *Bošnjak*, and outspoken community leaders insisted on religious rights and autonomy, transforming Islamic faith into a rallying point for collective action [18]. Their petitions demanded Muslim religious autonomy and the right to manage their own religious institutions, challenging Habsburg attempts to make Muslim clergy answerable only to Vienna. The defense of sharia law, requests for a Bosnian mufti, and the use of religious symbols in protests all served to reinforce a distinct Bosnian national identity rooted in Islam, making religious narrative a potent tool of nationalist resistance and negotiation during this period.

3.4. Historical narratives

Historical narratives supporting Bosnian nationalism derive from political developments such as Ottoman-era sovereignty and the legal status of Bosnia during Austro-Hungarian rule. Bosnia was a distinct province, or *eyalet*, within the Ottoman Empire from the late 15th century until the late 19th century, administered through a network of local governors, with Ottoman sovereignty including military, taxation, and judicial authority. Despite the Ottomans relinquishing administrative control to Austria-Hungary in 1878 following the Treaty of Berlin, Bosnia technically remained under Ottoman sovereignty until 1908, creating ambiguity that Bosnians could invoke to assert historical continuity and legitimacy. Granted, even after 1908, the Habsburg administration notably preserved Ottoman administrative divisions, merely renaming units such as the Bosnia Vilayet to *Reichsland*, *sanjaks* to *Kreise*, and *Kazas* to *Bezirke*, maintaining the existing spatial governance structures [21]. Though this act seemed counterintuitive for the Habsburgs, who wanted political stability in Vienna rather than autonomy in Bosnia, many measures were passed by the government in support of Bosnian nationalism following opposition to integration into Austrian society.

One key approach was the promotion of a pluralist Bosnian nation that included Muslims, Orthodox, and Catholics as equal citizens. The authorities strategically emphasized Bosnian folklore, history, and symbolism to craft a sense of shared Bosnian patriotism that aligned with loyalty to the empire, seeking to isolate Bosnia from external Serbian and Croatian nationalist influences [22]. Regarding language, the Austro-Hungarian authorities actually began supporting local newspapers like *Bošnjak* as well as promoting the Bosnian vernacular in schools, government, and media. The rationale behind this sudden shift in attitude towards Bosnian identity is simple: the Habsburgs aimed to insulate Bosnia from the aspirations of Orthodox Serbia and Catholic Croatia, both of which sought to unify their ethnic kin across borders. To this end, the Habsburgs planned to weaken the influence of neighboring nationalist movements by strengthening Bosnian identity and, more importantly, differentiating it from the Serbian and Croatian nationalists. In fact, the administration deliberately suppressed Serbian and Croatian national symbols, flags, folk songs, political organizations, and names within Bosnia to prevent these groups from consolidating nationalist sentiments that could challenge Habsburg rule. Ultimately, the Habsburg efforts proved deeply ironic as the First World War quickly swept across Europe in the following years. The assassination of Habsburg heir Franz Ferdinand in June 1914 is one of the most commonly traced origins of the conflict. The Archduke was shot twice in the capital of Bosnia, Sarajevo, by Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip.

3.5. The nature of nationalism in the modernist view

What the Habsburgs did, in a sense, is a perfect illustration of nationalism as described by Benedict Anderson. By promoting Bosnian vernacular as distinct from Serbian and Croatian dialects, endorsing unique Bosnian Muslim cultural identity, and endorsing a pluralistic national framework, the Habsburgs effectively participated in the construction of a new imagined community, since these elements are no more than deliberately crafted narratives which shape collective identity rather than reflecting any inherent or primordial reality.

Many argue that the very idea of a nation is not anchored in tangible assets, primordial attachments, or natural occurrences, but rather is socially constructed by people who perceive themselves as part of a shared community, even though its members will never know most of their fellow members personally. This has grown to be a fashionable view amongst scholars discussing the topic of nation, establishing the basis of thought for Modernist Sociologists. The key difference between social construction and “real”, primordial experiences is the natural inherent, and eternal ties—such as bloodlines, ethnicity, or “real” ancient connections—that the latter possesses while the former lacks.

In Benedict Anderson’s 1983 seminal work, *Imagined Communities*, the idea that nations, or nationalism, are to serve pragmatic goals such as state-building is first introduced. Specifically, Anderson argues that nations are not ancient nor natural entities, insisting that the nationalism project creates and maintains these imagined communities solely to fill the political vacuum left by the decline of older belief structures like religious communities. Though Anderson does not claim nationalism simply replaces religion, rather, he explains that due to deep social, technological, and political changes, new forms of shared identity, like the nation, have emerged to help people imagine themselves as part of a larger community. Historically, large religious communities like Latin Christendom or the Muslim Ummah served as entities in which people were unified and bound together by shared sacred languages and religious worldviews.

However, as the wave of rationalism brought upon by the Enlightenment swept across Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, the role of religious authority in society began to dwindle, no longer serving as the overarching, supra-national framework that provided certainty, meaning, and social cohesion.

It is precisely in this context, which Anderson asserts, that nationalism emerges as an exclusively “modern” ideology, driven by advancements in mass production and the dissemination of printed materials like books and newspapers in vernacular languages, which standardizes language and creates a common cultural framework. In Greece, this driving force was Aeschylus’ *Persae*.

In these imagined communities, members feel a shared identity despite lacking direct interaction. Like religious communities, nationalism provides narratives that give individuals meaning and a place within a larger story, turning the nation into a source of loyalty and purpose. This sense of unity is not achieved face-to-face, but through shared narratives, which then drives the creation of “culture”.

This imagined nature allows nationalism to function as a flexible tool for political regimes to mobilize populations. Free from any geographical confinement, nationalism is often utilized to unify diverse groups under a common identity and assert sovereignty and legitimacy by a political power. Nationalist narratives, in this sense, are simply crafted with the essence to foster a sense of political belonging within populations.

As much as nationalism is mobilized through the polarization between “members of the community” and “foreigners”, as seen in Ancient Greece, or emphasizing a threat to the entire community, the Modernist view, ultimately, does not see the full picture. As the name suggests,

Modernists attribute nationalism as an exclusively modern concept, emerging with the conditions of modernity such as industrialization, urbanization, increased literacy, and state formation. Thus, Modernists overlook important continuities and complexities revealed by the case of Bosnian nationalism. Indeed, Bosnian nationalism served practical purposes aligned with modernist claims: it was motivated to assert political agency within the Habsburg Empire, to resist imperial domination, and to create a cohesive identity necessary for collective action. From this perspective, nationalism operates as a tool that helps forge political sovereignty, consistent with Modernist scholarship. Yet, Bosnian nationalism also demonstrates that this pragmatic mobilization is deeply rooted in symbols derived from ethnic, religious, and historical narratives that predate the conditions of industrialization, urbanization, and mass communication. While political incentives and projects quickly mobilize Bosnian identity, the enduring and deeply rooted ties among the Bosnian people have ensured their continuity across centuries in the absence of ethnic sovereignty.

In essence, Anderson's modernist claims centralize not around the existence of narratives, but the primordality of those narratives. Anderson's modern constructs emphasize how nationalism invents or selects narratives and symbols to create a sense of unity, artificially created and lacking "naturalness" or primordial roots. Bosnian national narratives invoke long-standing connections to Ottoman rule, Islamic faith, local language, and shared ancestry, which many Bosnians regard not as invented but as an authentic continuity of their identity. These primordial ties provide a powerful emotional and social foundation that binds communities through perceived hereditary and ancestral connections, reinforcing belonging and solidarity beyond immediate political pragmatism.

4. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the role of created narratives in nationalism from ancient Greece to the Habsburg Empire, highlighting how nationalism has evolved yet retained core patterns. The exclusionary framework, first accounted for by the ancient Greeks, plays a role in unifying a community under a collective identity. The ancient Greek dichotomy between "Hellenes" and "barbarians," most recognized in the Pan-Hellenic resistance against Persia, laid the groundwork for later concepts of civilization versus invaders and liberty versus tyranny. This polarization not only unified disparate city-states but also permanently shaped Western ideas of selfhood and otherness, proving crucial in the building of national identity. Later, the Hungarian resistance to Habsburg authority saw the use of a wide variety of narratives to recreate this dichotomy. Within the Habsburg Empire, this legacy of exclusion and identity politics was reflected in contested political structures, cultural assertion through language, and religious and historical narratives that shaped nationalist movements in Hungary and Bosnia. Yet, as demonstrated through Bosnian nationalism, to claim that such formations of identity are merely modern inventions serving practical and political agendas is a vast generalization. Deeply embedded in historical, ethnic, and religious experiences that predate industrial modernity, nationalism can simultaneously be a modern political strategy and a continuation of pre-modern social and cultural realities.

One of the limitations of this paper is its lack of first-hand evidence. Aside from the respected literature works, sources contain little variety. Thus, future research could utilize further interdisciplinary approaches incorporating sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies to deepen understanding of how nationalism continues to evolve while drawing on historical legacies.

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